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## The Girl Who Cried Wolf /fiction

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## The Girl Who Cried Wolf

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fiction by Tim Bisha

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Kira fought through the heavy growth and emerged, torn and winded, in a small clearing. As she gasped for air the sound came again, closer now. It seemed to emanate from all around so she was no longer sure where to run, and there were no trees large enough to climb. Her hope of escape was fading.

Images whirled in her mind . . . Fangs . . . Blood . . . Crashing branches . . . Shadows and rocks . . . Violent death . . . flashing with the hideous pulse of the hunted. After a time, as panic deepened into fear, the whirling slowed and thoughts edged into view — fleeting — then more sustained. She strained to hear approaching sounds, and oscillated between an impulse to run and a decision to remain. How would she tell rescuer from predator before it was too late? How would she defend herself? She had not thought to pick up a stone or fallen branch during her flight. Now there was nothing in sight.

Maybe the wolf would not come. Or maybe it was not like stories tell, about being caught alone in the woods, about terror and flight. Kira looked around. For a moment her plight seemed unreal; the stories flickered like a mirage, and behind them the flawless afternoon proclaimed a truce. Heady fragrances mingled in the clearing. Overhead, a regatta of clouds rode the deep turquoise sky. Did the wolf fear her even more? Perhaps it was only curious. What if . . .

Kira backed into the centre of the clearing: no mirage was following her now. And at least one story had been true. Across the years it flooded back: the disappearance, the search, and the grisly discovery two days later, all summed up in one ghastly photo. But now it was Kira who lay crooked and half eaten upon the rocks. The clearing turned red with her death. The ring of bushes tightened. Carnivorous violence pressed in from all sides, preparing to rip her apart. Leaves blurred as she whirled to face the enemy. Then she grew still: taut with

panic, she needed only a trigger to make her bolt — the snap of a twig, the rustle of a branch . . .

Silence.

Presently, fatigue began to numb her fear, and in its place Kira felt hunger and thirst for the first time that afternoon. She had no food or water. Tonight the temperature would drop. What if it rained? If she found shelter, what then? Who would know to look for her?

As she continued to listen, it dawned on her that the howling had ceased some time ago. She also saw that running was futile. Where would she go? She didn't even know where she was. And how would she elude something that could be anywhere? The entire valley was her nemesis.

But futility was also her solace. It liberated her from the feeding horror of the chase, and in its place was the clearing: familiar now, a frontier against what was beyond. Fighting her stiffness, Kira found a soft patch of moss, then sat down and drew up her knees. For now, she would wait.

By and by, as her anticipation went unanswered, drowsiness set in and her thoughts began to drift . . .

*She was seven years old. She had seen a wolf at the zoo that day, and that night she dreamt that it escaped. A relentless predator, it stalked her through the undulating dreamscape, in and out of scenes and across worlds, until finally it had her cornered. Kira woke up screaming as the wolf leapt at her, then looked about, disoriented by the tranquility of her bedroom. The dream vanished, but the vision remained . . .*

A sound. Fear welled and Kira's eyes darted everywhere, seeking danger. They came to rest on a sparrow that had lighted on a twig nearby. It studied the scene for a while and preened itself. Then it was gone as quickly as it had come. Long afterwards, Kira was still taut and alert.

Taut and alert . . .

*She was ready for anything. She knew Hillary would win but that no longer mattered: pride had taken her over the edge. Now there was no going back so she resigned herself to losing, to being humiliated and hurt. Then, with the moment at hand, she spied the principal leaving the building and yelled frantically. In a flash the gang scattered, and when the principal arrived there was no one in sight — no one except Kira.*

She watched absently as the beetle crossed her shoe. It was iridescent and pear-shaped, like a drop of jewelry—

With a start she broke loose and looked around: there was nothing. Fatigue was heavier now. As the silence deepened, she shook her head repeatedly to clear an enveloping trance. Each time, it settled in deeper . . .

*Her room was dark except for a single light on the bureau. Next to the lamp was her oval mirror, which glinted as she entered the room. When she gazed into it she found that it framed her face perfectly. Her hair, the color of oak, billowed just enough to fill out the portrait. Her complexion, too, was set off beautifully by the color of the wood. Her eyes were wild, especially against the silver-grey mane. Sleek ears flared back at the top, and in the centre was a snarl so ferocious the glass barely held it in.*

Kira screamed at the vision, and when it dissolved she wandered for a moment in limbo, unsure what was real. Gradually the world returned. But the continued assault on her judgement had taken its toll. The fullness of her plight descended all at once and she yelled again for help. Soon afterwards, she drifted into sleep.

Sometime later Kira opened her eyes. A breeze ruffled the edge of the clearing, rousing leaves momentarily from their slumber. Then it tucked them in once more. Far down the valley a hawk screeched.

Kira had no memory as she looked about her. No thought, only the aroma of lichen, the deepening sky, the quiet light, the texture of fall. Near her foot an ant toiled in the waning heat of the afternoon. Kira did not notice these things. Crystal-

like, they grew into awareness: a leaf dropping from its perch, the burrowing of an earthworm.

So it was, moment by moment, that she became aware of something behind her. And without turning Kira knew it was the wolf. Like one looking back on a dream she saw the clearing; she remembered her careening flight, the violence of the hunt, her madness. She saw the after-image of a kill-crazy beast, surreal in the calm of one who had watched her as she slept. Now they watched each other, Kira with distant eyes, the wolf with the prick of its ears, both aware that the other had seen. For a long time neither moved.

But as they probed further, the wolf stirred: it sniffed the ground, then looked again at Kira. It tested the wind, took a faltering step forward and stopped. Finally it began to advance, each step a discovery, toward the centre of the clearing. In perfect balance Kira turned around—

The wolf seemed to explode. As it lay twitching the hunter entered the clearing, still aiming.

"You alright?" he asked. Kira stared.

"It's okay Miss. It's dead." He prodded the mess with his foot and soon the twitching stopped. The hunter put down his rifle and took out a canteen. Kira continued to stare. She was turning to meet the wolf . . .

"Good thing you yelled that last time", the hunter added, offering Kira the canteen. "I'd lost your direction. These hills play tricks on you."

Kira began to rise away from the red horror by her side. "It's alright Miss—" the hunter began.

But Kira had fled.